

# Notes on special meeting

## Northumberland VCS Consortium

10.00 a.m., Friday 18 December 2009  
St James's Church Centre, Alnwick

### Present:

Bob Langley	Community Action North'land/NSP Board
David Francis	Community Action Northumberland
Andrew Gooding	FONDT
Charles Tremeer	Volunteering Northumberland
Moira Macfarlane	CABx & Deputy Chair
Angus Robson	Groundwork Northumberland
Julie Davenport	Northumbria Daybreak/NSP Executive
Julia Lyford	Northumberland Community Dev Network
John Maude	North Country Leisure
Mike Dungworth	Community & Voluntary Action Blyth Valley/NSP Board
Jeff Armstrong	NCDN – equality & diversity
Anne Lyall	Employability
Peter Robinson	Church of England
Sandi Downing	Carers Northumberland
Carol Southam	VoiCeS
Thom Bradley	CVABV
Sheila McGuckin	WCVS/NSP Executive
Lesley Hill	Northumbria Youth

### From noon

Stuart Lawson	Head of Policy and Partnerships, NCC
Cllr Roger Styring	Deputy Leader, NCC
Cllr Neil Bradbury	Council lead on VCS Review

### **In attendance:**

George Courtice	Sector Development Officer
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### **Apologies:**

Rodney James	Chair of VCS Consortium
John Maude	North Country Leisure
Cath Carnaby	WHAC
Vanessa Proudlock	FONDT
Lynda Watson	Contract and Compact Officer
Jill Robson	Jobcentre Plus
Liz Prudhoe	Adapt (North East)
Georgie Cruddas	SixtyEightyThirty/NSP Executive
Christine Bone	GONE

## 1. Welcome

Moira Macfarlane took the chair, and welcomed those present.

## 2. Introduction

GC explained that because this was a special meeting with particular purposes, it was probably best to carry over the minutes for 24 September until the next meeting when there would be more time to consider them.

There were two parts to the morning:

A Table workshops to cover three important questions.

- 1 What can we learn from the survey results?
- 2 What should our priorities be? How should the Consortium respond to the proposal from NCC?
- 3 Changing the membership

B Presentation from and questions for the County Council's elected members and officer.

A folder of materials was provided containing:

- The Consortium business case 2010-14
- Summary notes of where we are with NCC
- NCC review of VCS
- NCC spending plans for 2010-11
- NCC's public consultation questionnaire
- Timetable for consultation meetings
- Summary of Survey Monkey results

## Report backs from table discussions

### Q1 What can we learn from the survey results?

All took heart in the high response rate (172 - nearly 50% of the total invited) but there were concerns that the respondents favoured those orgs which had received funding from a local authority during the last three years. On the other hand, because the first 4 questions related specifically to attitudes towards council funding, others thought it sensible to filter out the non-recipients for these first questions.

The database used for the survey had a bias towards the North and West of the county and so it is important that this is addressed in future.

The impact of a 20% cut on grants flowing to the sector from the NCC is similar to that identified by VONNE at a regional level in terms of both activities disappearing and job losses. There was concern that the real impact might not be felt for some time and that it would trigger a spiral of decline for both services and morale.

In relation to the impact of a loss of a particular support service, there is a danger of associating low numbers with a lack of importance. For those relatively few which identify the loss as having a high impact, its disappearance might be catastrophic. In addition, if the sample was biased towards larger organisations, some services might have consistently been ranked as not so important. Interestingly, and counter to the findings of similar surveys, respondents demonstrated that they rated “working more effectively with public bodies”, “help in forming networks”, and “representing & promoting the sector” highest of all.

Finally the wide range of sources for support, covering 12 different services, shows that infrastructure support comes in all different shapes & sizes.

## **Q 2 What should our priorities be? How should the Consortium respond to the proposal from NCC?**

There was a strong feeling that it was too late to change the spending plans, so efforts should be directed to manage the impact of the cuts. First & foremost we must get better at demonstrating our worth with clear evidence of the value of the differences we make. In the absence of NCC monitoring its investment, there is a vacuum which the Consortium needs to fill. Assuming this year’s lack of monitoring is temporary and due to staff changes/shortages, we need to take a view as to whether our role should be to help develop a monitoring/evaluation process or manage it ourselves. In the longer term, there was a view that the key to any sector growth would lie in its success at influencing what statutory bodies wanted to buy when they were shopping.

In this respect the approach the Council proposes is piecemeal. By dividing up the pot into groups of beneficiaries, often between different service departments, there is a real danger that some valued services will be forgotten, have nowhere to go, or fall through the gaps of Giving, Investing and Shopping. What is needed is an overarching, agreed commissioning framework with buy-in from all Council departments.

There was concern that Area Committees were not best placed to cope with the likely massive demand for core cost funding, presently ineligible under the Community Chest rules. There was also the problem of cross-Area delivery which had yet to be addressed. The meeting voted in favour of moving these decisions from Area Cttees to Area Partnerships.

The priorities in the Review seemed to vary between sections. There seemed no basis in prioritising some services as being vital to those in greatest need during a recession (CABx, Credit unions), but not others (Victim Support etc.)

It had to be recognised that with some services gaining from the proposals, an aggregate cut of 20% meant some services would be cut by a much higher percentage.

In terms of the Consortium’s priorities as listed in our Business case there was a view that important elements of support and development were not sufficiently highlighted. If the Consortium was to revise its membership structure to better reflect thematic and area based networks, then this needed to be taken into account.

### **Q3 Changing the membership**

There was general agreement that the plans outlined in the Business case were a move in the right direction. So a stronger presence from effective networks was the way forward as outlined in annex B.

#### **Northumberland County Council**

The meeting was joined by the following people from the County Council who were welcomed by the Chair.

Stuart Lawson	Head of Policy and Partnerships, NCC
Cllr Roger Styring	Deputy Leader, NCC
Cllr Neil Bradbury	Council lead on VCS Review

Roger Styring summarised the situation to date and explained that a further £30 million savings might still have to be found. A series of consultation meetings had been arranged in January and to which we were all welcome. It was hoped that a final decision on the budget would be made by full Council on February 10<sup>th</sup>. If no agreement was achieved then the last date was February 24<sup>th</sup>. RS stressed that this was the start of a three year period of severe belt tightening during which £80m had to be saved. The commitment to the sector was for a sum of £354,190 to be made available through grant aid each year for the next 2 years (2010-12).

#### **Then followed a question & answer session. This summarises the main points raised.**

The disproportionate level of cuts to the VCS was stressed and a rationale for this decision was requested.

*The Executive had sought advice from officers and had taken the decision in the light of that advice.*

Is either the Review or the planned VCS spending cuts up for negotiation? Policy should drive the budget - not sure this has occurred.

*The publication of the Review and the announcement of the planned cuts were unfortunate but they had to be viewed together. They were both running in parallel.*

The announcement of the VCS cuts at the end of November came out of the blue. All summer and autumn the joint Review board had been working on the assumption that the level of grant spending for next year would be about the same - perhaps a bit less, and the minutes confirm that.

*We have no explanation as to why you were given that impression. We had a reasonable idea of the necessary total reductions since May.*

Some of us have urged for funding decisions to be made much earlier in the summer. Now we are weeks away from having to implement them and they still haven't been finally resolved. Although NCC money is only a proportion of the total we receive, it gives confidence to other funders to invest. Any reduction in total spend from the Council will therefore be multiplied hugely.

There seems to be an assumption that the sector has plenty of fat and that its spending can be reduced substantially without affecting its delivery. The reality is that the VCS has already experienced a 12% reduction last year and has long been very responsive to changing its ways of working and making efficiencies.

*One of the problems we have had is the absence of a strong evidence base to make decisions.*

If large numbers of VCOs, which currently receive core funding from the Council, are not to be excluded from receiving future grant support, the rules governing the Community Chest must be changed to allow for this.

Is there any possibility that the level of proposed cuts to the VCS will increase before the budget is finally agreed?

*We cannot predict the outcome of any cross Party talks. However the current proposals are not likely to be revisited to save more money.*